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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001525

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DRL (JOHNSTONE); NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/26/2017
TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KDEM KPAO TS
SUBJECT: HUNGER STRIKER ARRESTED

REF: TUNIS 1486

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Journalist Slim Boukhdhir, who recently engaged in a hunger strike to protest GOT travel restrictions (Ref A), was arrested on November 26 while traveling to Tunis from Sfax. According to local contacts, Boukhdhir is facing charges of verbally insulting a police officer, not presenting his national ID card, and using foul/vulgar language. Boukhdhir appeared before a judge in Sfax on November 27, and his case was postponed until December 4. Bystanders reportedly said that Boukhdhir appeared to have been badly treated while in police custody where he remains. End summary.

Protestors Decide To Resume Hunger Strike

¶2. (C) After a two week hunger strike to protest GOT travel restrictions, attorney Mohamed Nouri and journalist Slim Boukhdhir announced on November 14 they were suspending their strike to pursue talks with GOT representatives (Ref A). Boukhdhir told PolOff on November 22 that he and Nouri were promised that the court-imposed travel ban on Nouri would be lifted, and that Boukhdhir would be issued his passport. After a week passed with no action, Nouri and Boukhdhir came to the conclusion that they were going to be put off indefinitely. Boukhdhir then told PolOff that he and Nouri had decided to resume the hunger strike in the next few days. As Boukhdhir was in the southern city of Sfax visiting his mother and brother, he and Nouri were planning to resume the hunger strike when Boukhdhir returned to Tunis.

Arrested

¶3. (C) On November 26, attorney Mohamed Abbou told PolOff that Boukhdhir had called him at 4:30 AM. Boukhdhir told Abbou that police had stopped his shared taxi en route from Sfax to Tunis and demanded he follow them to the police station. Before he could continue, the call was cut off. Abbou called Boukhdhir back, but the phone was answered by a policeman and then turned off. Abbou waited ten minutes, then called Boukhdhir's other phone, which Boukhdhir answered saying, "They've stopped me. They've stopped me." Abbou then heard a policeman and Boukhdhir arguing and then the phone was turned off. Abbou contacted an attorney in Sfax to locate and represent Boukhdhir. Other embassy contacts subsequently provided similar accounts of Boukhdhir's arrest.

Charges and Court Dates

¶4. (C) According to Lotfi Hajji, president of the Tunisian Journalists' Syndicate, Boukhdhir's attorney in Sfax eventually learned that Boukhdhir was arrested on charges of verbal aggression against a police officer, not presenting his national ID card, and using foul/vulgar language. The possible combined maximum penalty for these charges is 18 months in prison. Boukhdhir appeared before a judge in Sfax on November 27 and the case was postponed to December 4. PolOff spoke with Abbou again on November 27, and he confirmed that Boukhdhir remains in police custody. Abbou told PolOff that bystanders in the courtroom said that Boukhdhir appeared to have been "badly treated" while in police custody, but Abbou did not have specifics. Although Abbou did not attend the November 27 trial, he said he planned to attend the December 4 hearing.

Comment

¶5. (C) While Tunisian civil society seemed to initially be on the fence about supporting the hunger strikers, the GOT's failure to make good on their promise seems to have won Nouri and Boukhdhir newfound support. We were encouraged by apparent attempts to resolve diplomatically the standoff between the hunger strikers and the GOT, those talks seemed to have been unproductive. Boukhdhir's arrest only inflames the situation. We will continue to follow the case and seek to learn more about Boukhdhir's alleged mistreatment while in

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custody. End Comment.
GODEC